

A Perfect Moment

Sitting outside the home
on a late summer afternoon
under the lattice,
sunlight striping our faces,
you in your wheelchair
and I on the bench.
We comment on the
beauty of the day,
the perfection of the weather.
I notice your eyes are hazel
and you notice mine are
almost black.

Then holding my gaze,
you smile at me and
I smile back.
And in your eyes of hazel
straight into my heart
shines love so pure it
almost wounds me.
It must be the love
I am feeling for you
reflected back.

— MARSHA OSEAS

The Right Not to Die Alone

(Excerpt from *The Rights of the Dying* by David Kessler)

Many volunteers push through their fears [of death and dying] to be there for someone else. People also push through their fears by being with friends and loved ones. Lawrence, a thirty-seven-year-old with Hodgkin's disease, has been in remission for eleven years, but he has seen death and thought about his own. The process has made him more comfortable with the end of life, and taught him the importance of not letting anyone die alone.

"Our instincts are to pull away when someone is sick or dying. I've been close to a couple of people who were dying and I feel it makes a positive difference in the quality of their lives. I've noticed with people who are dying that the worst thing is to be alone. It's inhumane to be alone. It's better to have people with you laughing and smiling or crying and commiserating until the end. We are screwed up about dying in our culture. We don't know how to do it..."

As he went through the deaths of several friends, Lawrence learned how "to let death onto my landscape. It's like a wake-up call telling you

to go visit them if they're sick, be there for them.

"[My friend] Bill's death was the most peaceful I've seen. He chose where he wanted to die, at a friend's house, in a comfortable bed. He took time in the last few weeks to visit with people. He didn't pursue things medically, he decided it was time for him to go. He made his decisions about death and kept control of his dying. He created a quiet exit. He remained himself. His friends stayed themselves. He was the same in his last two weeks as he was normally. He had dignity. He died in character. He was fifty-six when he died.... I grew a lot with Bill's death."

With each death we learn how to do it a little better, we become more experienced and comfortable with an experience that is never in itself comforting. We learn that the only thing that can sometimes comfort us, or our loved ones, is our presence. There are no instructions; it's a process of trial and error, learning as you go. We all have the right not to die alone. It's much better for the dying and for the living if we do it together. ■

Train the Trainers

The next Train the Trainers workshop will be held in Chicago March 17-19, 2000.

If you are interested in becoming a *Compassion in Action* Trainer, please request an application from the CIA national office (CIANATL@aol.com or 310-473-1941). Applications must be received by January 31, 2000.

Adventures of a New Volunteer

I had been visiting a gentleman who had been drifting in and out of a coma. He had been having a rough time of it. On this day, he seemed to be resting more quietly.

When I arrived, the family was with him. We hadn't met yet, as this man was a relatively new referral. They wanted to know who I was and about *Compassion in Action*. It was a tough day for them. They were quite upset. As I looked at the wife, I saw my own mom when my father had died. I had no idea what to say. I had to trust that love would take care of it all.

It was awkward at first but soon we somehow all ended up in the room with the mom encouraging me to visit with her husband, giving up her bedside space to me, a total

stranger. They asked me to come back. As I left, I overheard them telling the patient that I would be back, that I was his friend, and that he didn't have to be alone. What an emotionally charged situation! I knew there was a lesson in all of this, but I couldn't quite define it yet.

Later that night, I returned to visit the man. His roommate also had a visitor who had questions about who we are and what we do. When I explained, he said, "That's really great what you guys do, but you have to be really strong, really tough for that!"

Then it hit me like a flash. "No," I said. "Tough doesn't cut it. No one is tough enough or strong enough for this stuff. The only way it can be done is by relying on *love*." ■